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Photo by GARY CROW

Gov. Brad Henry recently toured the Tar Creek Superfund site. Above, Henry notes conditions of creek water which runs orange beneath a Picher bridge.

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Henry to take Tar Creek issues to D.C.

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Miami News-Record

Just days before a visit to Washington, D.C., by Gov. Brad Henry, U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe announced what he said is a comprehensive plan to solve problems at the lead-contaminated Tar Creek Superfund site in northeastern Ottawa County

A spokesman for Henry said the governor and other state officials were reviewing Inhofe's plan, but that the governor had not said he would support it.

"We are in the process of reviewing the document. It is very long and very complex," said Paul Sund, director of communications for the governor. "We want to have our most knowledgeable people examine it in detail before we make any kind of decision on it. I know Gov. Henry looks forward to discussing the document with Sen. Inhofe when he meets with him on Monday."

Sund said the document was received at the governor's office Friday afternoon, shortly after a public announcement of the governor's Washington visit.

In the announcement, Henry said he planned to meet with members of Oklahoma's congressional delegation and with EPA officials during his visit.

Inhofe's announcement said a consent order would be used to permit parties involved in the Superfund site to complete cleanup. The announcement gave few details about the cleanup, but said the consent order would be signed soon.

Inhofe said progress will be made in Picher and Cardin, the two small municipalities that sit amid huge piles of mining waste and above miles of abandoned mines in the most contaminated part of the 40-square-mile Superfund site.

"This is the first major legal obstacle to be removed so that we can move forward with the commitment I made when I became chairman of the Senate Environment Committee to clean up Tar Creek after 20 years of waiting," Inhofe said.

The chairman of the Quapaw Tribe's business committee, John Berrey, joined Inhofe in making the announcement.

"This step is vital to moving the ball forward on the Tar Creek," Berrey said.

Tribal members once controlled 80 percent of the land within the Superfund site and about 50 members of the tribe own property where mining waste, or chat, has been piled within the site. Gravel-sized and sand-sized chat sells for \$6 to \$7 a ton and can be used in construction projects.

Between 50 and 80 million tons of chat, all of it containing lead, is currently piled within the boundaries of the site.

Local response to Inhofe's announcement could be more negative. Local activists have criticized the senator's previously announced plan for not being comprehensive and for failing to address a wide variety of issues, including the immediate health and safety concerns of residents, the potential for further groundwater contamination, the continuing threat of mine cave-ins and settling and the problem of downstream water pollution.

"Inhofe still doesn't have a clue to what is going on here," said Ed Keheley, a rural Quapaw resident who is technical advisor to the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee. "This does nothing for Picher and Cardin."

Henry announced Friday afternoon that he planned to visit Washington, D.C., Monday and Tuesday to discuss a comprehensive solution to what he has described as an ecological disaster in northeastern Oklahoma.

Just after taking office in January, Henry threatened a lawsuit against the federal government if he did not see progress toward a comprehensive solution at Tar Creek.

More recently, the governor promised to create his own plan if federal officials didn't come up with an acceptable solution.

"We owe it to the people to develop a comprehensive approach that addresses their concerns and the concerns of other stakeholders in the area," Henry said.